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ABSTRACT

The results of an informal, random survey that examined the freshman English offerings in 23 two-year and four-year colleges are contained in this paper. Among the findings reported are the following: (1) the majority of schools surveyed used a placement test of some kind, and over half required students to enroll in a particular course based on test scores; (2) the majority of schools used a rhetoric handbook and a book of essays or a combination of the two; (3) the number of papers students were required to write ranged from four to twelve per course; (4) verbal communication skills received little or no emphasis in most courses; (5) developmental English courses were of major concern to most schools; (6) the importance of individual student conferences was stressed by most schools; (7) systems for evaluating students' written work differed from school to school; and (8) several schools offered a library research paper course that focused exclusively on the techniques for writing such a paper. Appendixes contain a copy of the questionnaire used in the survey, along with the number of responses to each question and a list of schools responding to the survey. (FL)

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Sabbatical Report: A Study of College Freshman English Courses

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August 1980

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Be advised that this report is not a formal statistical analysis but an informal random survey.

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A. Placement Tests and Prerequisites

The majority of schools in my survey (19 of 23) did use a placement test of some kind and over half required students to enroll in a particular course based on test scores. Of the schools who merely recommended a course using test scores, several indicated their desire to place students instead.

B. Apparatus

The list of texts used in the basic first semester freshman English course is exhaustive. However, the overwhelming majority of faculty agreed on the types of texts. A rhetoric, handbook and book of essays or combination thereof were highly stressed. Most schools don't teach literature until the second semester but it is heavily emphasized then. All respondents had either complete freedom (assumed by many to be academic freedom) in choosing texts or at least a large degree of latitude in the final selection. For example, at one school a committee of English instructors chooses 5 readers and 5 rhetorics and the entire English faculty then vote on 3 each. When I inquired about bookstore policy and space, the thinking was that the bookstore was there to serve students and faculty.

The survey showed quite a range in the use of non-text material. Very few used these materials "a great deal." The majority were split between "very little," "some" and "somewhat." Most schools stated they were limited in the rental and purchase of AV materials but added this was not a problem as the allotted amount was quite satisfactory

Employability skills are not generally taught in freshman English. Often they are taught either in Business Communications or in nontransfer courses. Some schools which don't teach all employability skills do include the letter of application and resume in freshman English.

C. Requirements

The number of papers students are required to write in English composition ranges from 4 to 12. However, I found that those who responded in the 10-12 category included paragraph length papers as well as complete essays. Therefore, 4-9 probably reflects a more accurate count of fully developed papers. The majority of papers are written outside of class and in most cases students are allowed to rewrite their papers to improve their grades.

D. Content

Verbal communication skills receive little or no emphasis in most freshman English courses. These areas are usually covered in speech courses. Primary emphasis is placed on prewriting, thesis construction and development, structuring and ordering the essay, sentence effectiveness, and proofreading and editing. A somewhat lesser degree of emphasis is placed on grammar and punctuation, spelling and word choice. Nonfiction (essay models) rated higher than fiction.

E. Developmental English

A major area of concern to almost everyone I talked with was Developmental English. One school labeled the course "College Preparatory Writing," an appropriate title with less negative connotations than

Developmental or Remedial English. Another school simply titled the course "Review." Some of the more interesting procedures being used in this area are the following:

*Allowing students to take 1, 2 or 3 5-week modules, as needed.

*Allowing the student to enroll for the number of hours he desires by choosing section numbers corresponding to hours of credit, e.g., 098-04 means 4 hours credit.

*Requiring all English instructors (perhaps all instructors?!) to work one hour per week in the Alpha English Lab.

*Holding a few sections of Developmental English (098) to low numbers for students who enroll in 100-level courses and are then identified by the instructor as needing D.E. instead.

*Giving transfer credit for Dev. Eng. (WMU allows Kellogg C.C. to do this!)

I also encountered some innovations in the area of administration:

*Students must meet with a counselor prior to enrolling

*If a student enrolls for a specified number of credit hours (e.g. 15), he receives a flat tuition rate for any additional hours (e.g. 18 or 21 hours cost the same as 15). I don't know how feasible a flat rate would be, but in the interest of marketing, perhaps a "special" would attract attention: "Take 5 classes and get the 6th one free!"???

*Students may not drop freshman English

*Several sections of freshman English are taught in area high schools

*Make freshman English a 4 hour course: 3 hours spent in the classroom and 1 hour per week required in the lab working on handbook exercises, theme revision, etc.

F. Student Conferences

One question not included in the questionnaire but which kept coming up in the interviews was the use of individual student conferences. I was surprised to find that every school representative I talked with stressed the importance of such conferences. Many English departments require a minimum of 2 per semester for freshman English and of course some instructors use this technique exclusively.

G. Evaluations

We have been concerned for some time about the evaluation process of student papers. I encountered some interesting guidelines for evaluation in my interviews:

*A theme written out of class with 4 or more gross errors (run-on, fragment, comma splice or frequent misspelling) automatically receives a failing grade.

*Instructors keep folders with themes for each student. These folders may be reviewed in the instructor's office at the student's request but the themes are never returned for the student to keep.

*A 4-year business college requires all work (writing, especially letters and reports) to be 100% accurate and mailable.

*Students are required to write some in-class themes and must pass the in-class writing in order to pass the course. Any rewriting is done either in class or the Learning Lab.

*One instructor's grading system looked like this:

1.	Themes and Revisions	70%
2.	Quizzes	25%
3.	Fudge Factor (represents progress made, attendance, class participation, etc.)	5%

*Some schools require students in freshman English to pass a Library Use Test in order to pass the course.

Several schools offer a Library Research Paper course which focuses exclusively on the techniques and procedures for writing a paper. This is usually only a 1 or 2 credit hour course and is in addition to the second semester freshman English course which includes the research paper as part of its content.

STUDY OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH COURSES

Placement Tests and Prerequisites:

1. Do you use a Placement Test? 19 Yes 4 No

2. Does it include a writing sample? 10 Yes 7 No

3. Is the test valid and reliable? 12 Yes 5 No

4. Is the Placement Test : 8 a published test?
7 developed within your institution?
2 both

5. Would you be willing to trade or swap data gathered from this Placement Test? 11 Yes 1 No 2 Maybe

6. Does this Placement Test allow you to: 10 place students in a particular course?
8 merely recommend which course they should take?

7. Are prerequisites required to enroll in freshman English? 11 Yes 10 No

8. Are these prerequisites: 10 enforced?
2 recommended?

Apparatus:

9. What text(s) is used in the course?

(A very extensive list; availabe upon request.)

10. Are you presently looking for a text you can't find? If so, what combination of topics interests you?

5 Yes 13 No

Topics - Rhetoric/Reader
Focusing topics, detailed development, student samples, rhetorical models, vocabulary, simple grammar

11. Does the course include:

rhetoric?	21 Yes	2 No
a handbook?	20 Yes	3 No
essays?	18 Yes	5 No
literature?	8 Yes	15 No

12. To what extent are non-text materials such as films, discussions, games, etc. used in the course?

0 none at all
6 very little
5 some
7 somewhat
3 a great deal

13. Are you limited in the rental and purchase of audio visual materials?
13 Yes 7 No If so, what is your annual budget?
Varies from year to year; $3000; $1000; $1800;

14. Are Employability Skills included as part of the course material?
4 Yes 13 No
6: other "qualified" yes's: taught in Bus. Comm.-4; taught in 2-year non-transfer course; only letter & resume

Requirements:

15. How many papers are students required to write?

___ 1-3
7 4-6
8 7-9
7 10-12
1 more than 12

16. What percentage are written in class? ___ Outside of class ___?
1: Rough drafts 7: 25-50% 2: 75-100%
8: 0-25% 3: 50-75%

Research paper: 1
0-25: 1
25-50: 1
50-75: 6
75-100: 9

17. Are students allowed to rewrite any papers? 19 Yes 4 No
(2 said if "F" paper)

18. Does a grade on a rewritten paper affect the original grade? 18 Yes 0 No

19. Are the grades related to competency based objectives? 11 Yes 8 No

20. If you teach in a 2-year college, are different English courses offered for the certificate and transfer students? 7 Yes 11 No 3; N/A

Content:

What emphasis is placed on the following contents of your freshman English course?
Note: #21-24 are covered in Speech courses in most schools.

21. The study of communication theory.

7 A. None
7 B. Very little
8 C. Some
0 D. A good deal
1 E. Very much

22. The study of communication barriers.

8 A. None
6 B. Very little
8 C. Some
0 D. A good deal
1 E. Very much

23. The study of communication models.

10 A. None
5 B. Very little
5 C. Some
2 D. A good deal
1 E. Very much

24. The study of effects of personality traits on communication.

10 A. None
5 B. Very little
8 C. Some
0 D. A good deal
0 E. Very much

25. Prewriting skill.

0 A. None
2 B. Very little
8 C. Some
6 D. A good deal
7 E. Very much

26. Thesis construction and development.

0 A. None
0 B. Very little
1 C. Some
8 D. A good deal
14 E. Very much

27. Structuring and ordering the essay.

0 A. None
0 B. Very little
1 C. Some
5 D. A good deal
17 E. Very much

28. Sentence effectiveness, appropriateness, and adequacy.

0 A. None
0 B. Very little
2 C. Some
10 D. A good deal
11 E. Very much

29. Conventional grammar and punctuation.

0 A. None
4 B. Very little
9 C. Some
9 D. A good deal
1 E. Very much

30. Spelling.

0 A. None
7 B. Very little
12 C. Some
3 D. A good deal
1 E. Very much

31. Word choice and word study.

0	A.	None
1	B.	Very little
12	C.	Some
7	D.	A good deal
3	E.	Very much

32. Proofreading and editing.

0	A.	None
0	B.	Very little
4	C.	Some
10	D.	A good deal
8	E.	Very much

33. Nonfiction.

1	A.	None
0	B.	Very little
12	C.	Some
5	D.	A good deal
5	E.	Very much

34. Fiction.

12	A.	None
3	B.	Very little
5	C.	Some
0	D.	A good deal
3	E.	Very much

Schools Contacted

Minneapolis Community College - Minneapolis, Minnesota

Glen Oaks Community College - Centerville, Michigan

Western Michigan University - Kalamazoo, Michigan

Grand Rapids Jr. College - Grand Rapids, Michigan

Kellogg Community College - Battle Creek, Michigan

Cleary College - Ypsilanti, Michigan

Eastern Michigan University - Ypsilanti, Michigan

Normandale Community College - Bloomington, Minnesota

Sant Xavier College - Chicago, Illinois

Marion Technical College - Marion, Ohio

Bismarck Jr. College - Bismarck, North Dakota

College of Du Page - Glen Ellyn, Illinois

Parkland Community College - Champaign, Illinois

St. Clair Community College - Port Huron, Michigan

Vincennes University - Vincennes, Indiana

Hutchison Community College - Hutchison, Kansas

Holy Cross Jr. College - Notre Dame, Indiana

Southwestern Michigan College - Dowagiac, Michigan

Grand Valley State College - Allendale, Michigan

The Loop College - Chicago, Illinois

Oakland Community College - Farmington Hills, Michigan

Prairie State College - Chicago, Illinois

Macomb Community College - Warren, Michigan